

'The Economy of Medieval Wales, 1067-1536', Book Review.

McGuinness, Shaun

Journal of the Mortimer History Society

Published: 01/01/2020

Peer reviewed version

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Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

McGuinness, S. (2020). 'The Economy of Medieval Wales, 1067-1536', Book Review. *Journal of the Mortimer History Society*, 4, 106-109.

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Matthew F. Stevens, *The Economy of Medieval Wales, 1067-1536* (Cardiff, 2019).

Book Review.

‘There is no general survey of the economy of medieval Wales’, begins Matthew Stevens in his new book. As such, there is no equivalent to Jim Bolton’s ‘strongly data-driven’ *The Medieval English Economy, 1150-1500* (1980), nor to the two volumes on the English economy between 1086 and 1348 produced by Edward Miller and John Hatcher (published in 1978 and 1995). Further, historians of pre-modern Britain have tended to ‘eschew Welsh evidence as arising from an academic *terra incognita*, or to extend Anglocentric narratives to Wales uncritically’. According to Stevens, the ‘continued lack of a critical mass of work in most areas of the economic history of Wales inhibits scope for comparison and debate’.

The historiography for the economy of medieval Wales is surveyed by the author in his introduction. While Sir J. E. Lloyd is often considered to be the ‘father’ of academic Welsh history, Stevens argues that Lloyd’s contemporary, Edward Lewis, citing the latter’s 1903 essay ‘The Development of Industry and Commerce in Wales during the Middle Ages’ and his 1912 monograph, *The Medieval Boroughs of Snowdonia*, should be considered the father of the economic history of Wales. Like Lewis, William Rees, who was influenced by the new holistic approach of the French *Annales* school, was a product of the London School of Economics. His *South Wales and the March, 1284-1415* (1924) was the first detailed monograph on the medieval Welsh rural economy. Later in the twentieth century, following Thomas Jones Pierce’s re-examination of Frederick Seebohm’s, at times, ‘problematic’ *The Tribal System in Wales*, and the work of Jones Pierce’s student, the historical geographer, Glanville Jones, on medieval Anglesey, it is to *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, between 1972 and 1991, that we are directed for ‘the most comprehensive collection of

essays on the economic history of medieval Wales yet published'. Population, resources, farming techniques, as well as land occupation are amongst topics covered in the essays. Elsewhere, seigniorial incomes, the economic consequences of the Edwardian conquest of Gwynedd, and urbanisation have been considered.

Steven's first chapter sets out the nature of Welsh economic and social systems at the time of William fitz Osbern's 1067 foray into Gwent, assessing the impacts of invasion and colonisation, via the Edwardian conquest of 1282-3, to the onset of the Great Famine of 1315-22. He suggests that social structures before 1100 were designed to maximise economic output, thus denser unfree communities were tied to the best lowland arable land with more dispersed free communities in the less productive upland areas. Taxation was based on the territorial unit known as the *maenor* (*maenol* in Gwynedd) described in an idealised form in the Welsh laws, that supplied either labour or food renders in the case of unfree communities, or a *gwestfa* tribute (later commuted to a notional cash sum called the *twnc* pound) in the case of free extended-family groupings, to the Welsh prince or lord. In the years between 1100 and 1300, there was, quoting Jones Pierce, 'a veritable agrarian revolution'; interaction between the native Welsh and the Anglo-Norman incomers had a profound and transformative effect on Welsh society and the economy, well beyond the areas that came under direct and durable Anglo-Norman control. Even so, while wheat was the most valued medieval crop, the population of Wales grew and ate substantially more oats, which are more tolerant of high rainfall and poor soils. (Gerald of Wales noted the reliance of the Welsh on oats in his *Descriptio Cambriae*, c.1194). In this respect, the March was a hybrid economy, situated between Wales and the English borderlands such as Herefordshire where wheat dominated.

The second chapter considers the medieval economy 'at its apex', that is between 1282 and the Black Death, detailing the patterns of industry, commerce, urbanisation and economic lordship that had, by then, emerged. The natural resources of Wales were exploited; there were mineral resources (stone, lime, slate, sea coal and lead) as well as timber. A succession of English kings had ordered Welsh forests and woodlands cleared, at first for military purposes, and then 'for the common weal', and this, combined with the hacking out of new settlements along the English border, meant that timber became an important part of the rural economy particularly in densely wooded north Wales, and the northern March. Most noteworthy is the increase in circulating English coinage, what Bolton called the 'flood of silver' (silver pennies, half pennies and farthings); the total face value increasing from *circa* £30,000 in the twelfth century to an estimated £2,000,000 by 1319. A disproportionate amount of this coinage flowed into Wales by way of new towns, their markets and fairs, and the huge post-1282 royal spending on castles, which itself pushed up wages; Edward I issuing a 'Statute of Stipends' instituting a form of wage control, before 1302-3. However, in the fourteenth century, the flood of silver slowed and reversed, with seigniorial revenues (often generated by arbitrary taxation, income from 'judicial lordship', and exploitation of traditional Welsh dues such as *amobr*) being seen as the personal fortune of the relevant lord, with little thought for reinvestment. By the 1330s, 'rents accounted for just 19% of the revenues of the Mortimer lordships of the middle March'. Most of the lords' revenue came from the income generated by judicial lordship and arbitrary taxation.

Chapter three surveys the decline and subsequent restructuring of the economy between the onset of the Great Famine in 1315, and the first 'Act of Union' in 1536, including the effects of the Black Death and the revolt of Owain Glyndŵr. The limited regional surveys that have been undertaken suggest that labourer's wages in Wales rose sharply after the

plague, although not as much as in England, where the 'Statute of Labourers' was enacted in an attempt to curb wages. Still in the lordship of Dyffryn Clwyd, 217 labourers were fined for demanding 'excessive wages'. Stevens highlights specific work that in his opinion needs to be done. He laments, for example, that no modern, systematic study of the Black Death in Wales has yet been undertaken. Further, the task of systematically reconstructing wage and price data from post-plague Wales, whilst challenging, is achievable. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, England and Europe found themselves in the so-called 'European depression', whilst in Wales only the cloth industry, which exported eastwards, taking Welsh merchants, traders and labourers to Shrewsbury, Hereford, and Bristol in great numbers, escaped the general post-Glyndŵr economic recession. When the first 'Act of Union' was enacted in 1536 the Welsh economy was more intimately linked to the English economy than ever before. The agricultural interior was impoverished and increasing numbers of Welsh men and women were moving to England. Only the port towns of south Wales and the cloth-producing areas, especially in the northern March, exhibited signs of modest, and durable, prosperity.

In the fourth and final chapter, in lieu of a traditional conclusion, the author offers a theoretical approach to the subject of medieval economic and social change in Wales. Stevens outlines the three 'classic supermodels' of economic change that he says historians have used, whether consciously or not. These three models are the 'demographic' also called the 'population and resources' or the 'neo-Malthusian' model; the 'Marxist' or 'neo-Marxist' model, focusing on class, power and property relations; and the 'commercialisation' model focusing on commercialisation, markets and technology. Stevens states that each has its own strengths and weaknesses, and they are not always mutually exclusive, and in practice, most historians marry the strengths of each. However, a better

approach to assessing economic change in Wales, the author avers, is to keep in mind a number of factors while using the said models as tools of investigation. Those factors are firstly, conquest, secondly, ethnic difference and thirdly, geography. These three factors, more than any others he argues, serve collectively to explain the changes in the Welsh economy from the first Norman invasion into south-east Wales in 1067 to the first 'Act of Union' in 1536. Conquest altered almost every social and economic institution down to the building block that was the *gwely* system. Ethnic difference led to the 'ghettoisation' of the Welsh in legally defined or de facto Welshries. Geography explains the poor calorie-producing potential of the land due to only 14% of Wales being suitable for arable farming, and the modest demographic growth.

In the author's own words, his book 'seeks to provide a critical synthesis of existing work on the economy of medieval Wales from the early twentieth century to the present, and to advance beyond it'. Above all, the goal is to 'promote discussion and to stimulate further research, and to show that the economy of Wales is a worthy and invigorating area of study in its own right'. Stevens' compact narrative of the economic history of Wales to 1536; his analysis of the current state of knowledge on the medieval Welsh economy; his argument that in conjunction with accepted models of economic change, three factors, namely conquest, ethnic difference and geography need to be considered; combined with his challenge to historians of medieval Wales, are an academic call to arms to put research into Welsh medieval economic history on a footing with that in England and Europe. If the author's call is heeded, the resulting research will also, no doubt, test the veracity and suitability of Stevens' suggested *modus operandi*.

Shaun D. McGuinness
Bangor University